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## Testing of Messages on Healthy Eating Executive Summary

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*Ce sommaire est aussi disponible en français.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Health Canada is mandated to develop and promote evidence-based dietary guidance, which is communicated through Canada’s Food Guide (CFG) and other life stage guidance. Health Canada is revising Canada’s Food Guide to strengthen healthy eating recommendations and communicate guidance in ways that better meet the needs of different users. The purpose of this specific research is to provide insight on how proposed foundational statements and related terminology resonate with the intended target audience. The total cost to conduct this research was \$54,525.83, including HST.

The objectives of the research were to evaluate the foundational statements in order to determine whether they were: clear, credible, relevant and of value to the audience; practical, easy to understand, easy to remember; appealing and appropriate to the cultural and emotional sensitivities of the audience; of the appropriate tone; and, able to collectively motivate the audience to take personal actions.

To meet these objectives, Earncliffe conducted a wave of qualitative research. The research included a series of eight focus groups in four cities across Canada: Toronto, ON (June 12); Moncton, NB (June 13); Vancouver, BC (June 13); and, Montreal, QC (June 14). The focus groups in Montreal were conducted in French.

The focus groups were conducted with Canadians eighteen years of age and older. In each city, one focus group was conducted with those at risk of marginal health literacy (as screened by the Newest Vital Sign, scoring < 4/6), while the other group was conducted with those with adequate health literacy (as screened by the Newest Vital Sign, scoring 4+). Each group included a mix of sexes, ages, household incomes, education levels, as well as a mix of cultural background and Indigenous peoples. Please refer to the Recruitment Screener in the Appendix of this report for all relevant screening and qualifications criteria.

For the purposes of this report, the term “diet” refers to the practice of eating food and the food one eats.

*It is important to note that qualitative research is a form of scientific, social, policy and public opinion research. Focus group research is not designed to help a group reach a consensus or to make decisions, but rather to elicit the full range of ideas, attitudes, experiences and opinions of a selected sample of participants on a defined topic. Because of the small numbers involved the participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly representative in a statistical sense of the larger population from which they are drawn and findings cannot reliably be generalized beyond their number.*

The key findings from the research are presented below.

- **Overall reaction to the statements was generally positive. Participants felt that the statements were clear and that the language used was appropriate and easy to understand.** Worth noting, is that this was consistent across all groups; there were no differences in terms of geography, or more importantly, health literacy.
- **The advice was deemed practical, relevant and easy to remember. In fact, most participants felt that the statements were in line with what they know about healthy eating and were consistent with their own personal practices and efforts to eat healthy.** Indeed, those more knowledgeable about the current Canada's Food Guide volunteered that these statements represented a modern and relevant update to the resource.
- **With respect to tone, participants felt that the statements hit the mark in terms of providing sound advice in a way that was direct yet conveyed a sense of understanding.** They did not feel they were made to feel guilty about their diet and/or choices. In fact, most said that while they try hard to eat healthy, there are occasions when circumstances influence one to make an unhealthy choice and the fact Health Canada recognized that, was appreciated.
- **On the question of proportionality, most participants were able to distinguish between the various proportionality terms used throughout the statements.** Having said that, there tended to be one or two participants in each group who would have preferred some guidance in terms of quantity (i.e., suggestions about the quantity of fruits and/or vegetables, number of servings, etc.). Others tended to argue that they preferred that there were no metrics that they needed to try to live up to and preferred the advice to choose or limit one type of food over another.
- Nearly all participants could see themselves in these messages. **The general consensus was that the guidance was applicable for all diets (i.e., vegan, vegetarian and omnivore) although some, particularly omnivores, had the sense the guidelines were encouraging Canadians toward a vegetarian diet.** While most agreed that a diet based primarily on plant-based foods was appropriate, there was a sense that guidance relating to the consumption of meat was diminished and not exactly in line with their preferences. For a small number, the perception of being encouraged to eat a vegetarian diet undermined the overall effectiveness of the collection of messages.
- **In terms of the appeal and appropriateness of the statements to cultural and emotional sensitivities, reactions were somewhat mixed.** Most appreciated that the messages were attempting to represent the diversity of Canada and the cultural variations of foods eaten in this country. However, the qualifier in the first statement about choosing foods that you enjoy and that reflect your culture and traditions was felt to be limiting or distracting. Participants value the opportunity to experience different foods and incorporate other cultural influences in their diet. Further, there were some who pointed out that the diet of their own culture was actually unhealthy due to traditional cooking methods or ingredients. These people were actively seeking to avoid the foods of their culture in order to eat a healthier diet.
- **While some participants indicated that they would be motivated to do something as a result of these messages, most felt that it served as more of a helpful reminder and to encourage personal reflection.** Many felt that they were already making a concerted effort to heed the guidance communicated in the

statements and that the information was not all that new. Some suggested that they would be motivated to get clarification on some of the terms (e.g., healthy fats, saturated/unsaturated fats, etc.).

- Finally, participants tended to believe that the statements were organized into two types of guidance: first, guidance about nutrition and healthy eating choices; and, second, guidance about lifestyle choices and healthy eating habits. While reactions were generally favourable towards both types of guidance, they tended to be a little more favourable toward the statements about lifestyle and healthy eating habits. Participants felt these statements conveyed an important holistic approach to healthy eating. When asked if they would make any changes to the presentation of the information, some felt it would be interesting to begin with the guidance about healthy eating habits as a way of framing the advice about specific nutrition choices.